EMERGING ISSUES

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Aurality and COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: COVID-19's profound impact on the aural landscape goes beyond the silence of urban locales under quarantine, the sonic reemergence of nature, or the substantial alterations of both personal and collective listening habits in everyday life. The author utilizes a mix of sound studies, Continental philosophy, and journalistic accounts to contend that COVID-19 has also cast aurality as the quintessential epistemological device through which the virus has been conceptualized and experienced. In establishing the viability of this argument he weaves through three distinct critical junctures, moving in scope from infinitesimal to immeasurable. The first is to argue that the in-itself of COVID-19 resists any easy recourse to typical visualist paradigms of representation, and can thus only be experienced through abstract traces that primarily engage with the ear. The second contends that the experience of mass social isolation created a new and unexpected heuristic efficacy for the concept of *hearing-oneself-speak* through the inner voice, which is traced through the writings of Edmund Husserl, Jacques Derrida, and Plato. The third connects the inner voice of quarantine with the summer of protest that emerged in response to the death of George Floyd. Arguing that the inner voice was instrumental in the development and performance of an ethical listening with regard to the summer of protest, it presents a paradox where the efficacy of this ethical listening required the intervention of a pandemic that has brought death and suffering to millions.

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I.

I admit that Arthur Schopenhauer is not the first person who comes to mind when looking for a passage to articulate the experience of an aural impact. That sullen gadfly upon the Hegelian ideological project was, for better or worse, a metaphysician par excellence, unmoved by the quibbles of materialist inquiry in his search for the domineering cosmic presence of the Will. You can imagine my surprise, then, when I encountered a short essay titled "On Noise," in which Schopenhauer purports to name what he thought was the greatest aural scourge of the self-conscious mind. His villain is, suffice it to say, as unexpected as his tone is pedantic.

> With all due respect for the most holy doctrine of utility, I really cannot see why a fellow who is taking away a wagon-load of gravel or dung should thereby retain the right to kill in the bud the thoughts which may happen to be springing up in ten thousand heads—the number he will disturb one after another in half an hour's drive through the town. Hammering, the barking of dogs, and the crying of children are horrible to hear; but your only genuine assassin of thought is the crack of a whip; it exists for the purpose of destroying every pleasant moment of quiet thought that any one may now and then enjoy. (Schopenhauer 1893, 129)

Your first thought might be to wonder how Schopenhauer would have handled the panoply of sirens and construction noises that accost urban ears on a daily basis if he had such objections to the occasional passing carriage. Proximity to an international airport would no doubt have driven him to madness. And yet, his commitment to isolating noise in the particular (the crack of a whip) and its affectation in the abstract (the thoughts of thousands) solicits interest. Schopenhauer's formulation upends the typical modern conceptualization of our relationship to noise, where undifferentiated panoply elicits a unique, subjective response that bisects mind and body. For him, the only true victim of noise is the head. Such an argument would have seemed quaint as late as 2019. Little did we know that events would compel Schopenhauer's tiny missive to hold unexpected relevance, with presence of mind gaining a sonic foothold unthinkable to our prior expectations within a mediated environment of endless distraction.

The events of 2020, if nothing else, made one wish for the simple annoyance of that ordinary noisiness Schopenhauer so abhorred. For nothing about sounded life within the inexorable spread of COVID-19 was ordinary in the least. During the first few months of the pandemic, it was hard to miss commentary on how much the seemingly reliable *mise-en-scène* of the global soundscape had changed. Urban streets usually bustling with activity were silenced, becoming the site of curious soundwalks and online cataloging projects (Bui and Badger 2020; Elks 2020). Natural sounds of birds and animals previously overwhelmed by modern noise again began to assert themselves in unexpected places (Keena 2020). Symphony orchestras played for deserted concert halls, opaque to the world except through online streaming (Ross 2020). Musicians took to communication software such as Zoom to construct a tenuous ordinary life of performing opportunities with collaborators far and wide. Lyrical reimaginings of well-worn pop tunes were posted to Twitter under the hashtag #coronasongs. And an artificial intelligence created before the pandemic, which was designed to analyze the presence and intensity of coughing in a crowd of people during flu season, found a new and imperative purpose (Fitch 2020). None of this even mentions the sonic upending of households in quarantine (suddenly desolate or suddenly crowded), which paled in comparison to victims of the disease (suddenly desolate) dying silently in ICU isolation chambers (suddenly crowded). Yes, a strange and fragile ambivalence settled within this mass social upheaval of aural worlds. And those worlds created an environment where economic disaster for musicians and venues could coexist with the odd wonder of hearing goats wander through the streets of a deserted Scottish village like the skirmishers of a victorious natural army (Khaliq 2020).

Yet just when this new normal seemed to cement into place, the torturous eight minutes, forty-six seconds of George Floyd gasping for his last breaths in Minneapolis overturned that entire sonic paradigm overnight. The quiet dreamworld of the early pandemic was replaced by the sounds of people in the streets, of police retaliation, and of a collective reckoning among Whites with the silent violence perpetuated upon African Americans for centuries. When those protests started to wane in intensity toward the end of the summer, their impact continued in the toppling of Confederate statues and the erasure of mascots like the Washington Redskins, both imbued with the long-standing symbolic power of White supremacy. With the fall of 2020 marked by the most contentious and important American presidential election since 1860, and the new year by an insurrection in the halls of the US Capitol, the sonic markers of everyday life shifted again and again into the realm of the unexpected. The only consistent aspect of COVID-19 seemed to be its creation of an ideal state for the emergence of what Victor Turner called *spontaneous communitas*—assemblages of community defined as much by their temporal and spatial instability as their intensity and multiplicity (Turner 1991, 132). This turn, of course, is not exclusive to the purview of aurality. But we can all think of countless examples that touched our aural worlds in some way. Early on, people took note of Italian citizens engaging in mass song from the physical isolation of their apartment balconies. Much later, those same ears heard the countercultural being-with emerging from Seattle's CHOP (Capitol Hill Occupied Protest) autonomous zone. These two very different communitarian sonic intensities emerged within months of one another, soon consigned to a history in which every passing day felt more distant from the last.

If the events described in the preceding paragraph seem to make the nearly ungraspable series of changes to aural life under the coronavirus bleed together, such a feeling must be seen as a feature instead of a bug. Even now, reading through the growing array of narratives and opinion pieces attempting to articulate some sense of COVID-19's broader impact on aural cultures, one feels as if one is trying to peel an unripe banana still attached to the tree. Anything striving to capture these intensities in writing bears its temporal mark before the digital ink is dry. (I sympathize with philosopher Slavoj Žižek [2020] in this regard.)[1] Some may even question the ability of critics to disentangle any aural impact of COVID-19 apart from the almost limitless disruption the virus caused. They may even choose to describe their concern with the word "myopic," that well-worn signifier given to those who, in a colloquial sense, are lacking in vision. In response, I contend that one of the most infernal tricks of the virus has been to render the entire world myopic. It created a sense of perpetual, unending present, where the past offered no guide or comfort and the fog of the future gathered thicker than any pondering modern thought possible. Unable to see, unwilling to touch, surrounded every day by bitter tastes and pungent smells both actual and metaphorical, when even language became suspect and masked silence emerged as the best antidote to viral spread, the ear seemed to be all we had left to orient any sense of self, community, or worlding (Thompson 2020).

For this reason, declaring the age of the novel coronavirus an age of aurality seems prescient, although elucidating its Janus-faced potential makes settling on this all-encompassing term a difficult task. One particular charm that aurality possesses, though, is its conceptual flexibility beyond the mere purview of the sonic. The term carries a tangible tie to hermeneutical engagements with written texts, and some of its most recent and influential enactments ground this sensibility in the production of knowledge within modes of institutional and colonial power, a connection that is important for my purposes.[2] Aurality also encompasses a trans-sensory ontological dimension that ties hearing to the imagination, spatiotemporal orientation, desire, inner states of the self, and community. The concept thus commits less to outlining knowledge and experience acquired through listening than to creating a mentality framed by those attributes that can be utilized in contexts outside of listening. In other words, aurality also encompasses ideas of a listening eye, a hearing hand, and all of the problems those sensory assemblages might entail. And within this pervasive role, I argue, aurality not only helps us to remember the seemingly disparate spring silences and summer cries of early pandemic life that a mere year later have already drifted into the register of the dream, but also helps those same silences and cries resonate together into something both graspable in that moment and memorable for posterity.

Getting at this idea with any acuity will necessitate a certain level of abstraction from everyday events on the ground, much as one listens to a pop song for the hi-hat pattern or the timbre of a synth patch. What this particular hi-hat rattles is a spate of philosophical rumination, a way of thinking uniquely suited to a time defined by the frayed bounds of sociability. In this spirit, I will briefly explore three perspectives that manifested from the conceptual underbelly of aural life under the coronavirus. Each section could be an essay unto itself, and can be read as such, but I will also provide plenty of connective tissue between them to make a more sustained engagement worthwhile. I outline them here in the form of some rudimentary questions. First, as we come to understand that our intensely visual paradigms for capturing the ethos of disaster failed us early on with regard to this global contagion, how might this situation propel the ear into a unique position of sensory power and understanding? Second, how does a revitalized interest in the subjective inner voice, which developed in the context of quarantine isolation, connect the intense ethics of listening to the cry of the oppressed, which became a political charge during the height of the pandemic summer in 2020? And third, how can we grapple with the uneasy idea that this downhill tumble into a powerful ethics of listening would not have been possible absent the intervention of a virus that has caused (and will continue to cause) misery for millions?

Here I am not striving to present some grand narrative for understanding aurality under COVID-19. The virus has affected different communities (elite and marginalized alike) in different ways, and I anxiously await the groundswell of perspectives that will fill in the gaps over the coming years. Rather, I am choosing to focus on

a way of thinking about the question of aurality that seemed central to the early moments of coronavirus spread and will, I fear, fade into obscurity with the march of time. This is why I find referencing a term like the "age of coronavirus" useful in limited respects, even though the totality of COVID-19's social, cultural, economic, and political impacts makes questionable recourse to any term clothed in a universalist veneer.[3] The term captures a time during the early months of the virus when its rapid spread across the world made imagining a certain type of global ubiquity both possible and perhaps even pragmatic. Whether or not such thoughts were warranted or accurate, they were certainly significant. Objects of universal experience, the spitballs of modernity, are hard to come by in the humanities and social sciences post-Foucault.[4] Yet the very *virality* of the virus, and the ways that that sense of virality informs imaginings of what viruses *do*, made thinking some "age of coronavirus" at least *possible*, if only in a limited sense. (More on this in the next section.) Once quarantines and closures drew a veil over the broader world, one could not help but think that the virus was everywhere. COVID-19 became a wild card in the actualization of thought and habit, hanging over elections, family gatherings, the availability of toasters, even the experience of time and space. While this may not rise to the level of an ontological truth, it certainly is significant as an aesthetic register felt in a myriad of lived situations and expressed through countless forms of practice. So you could say that recourse to the "age of coronavirus" is less a historical designation than a rhetorical intensity, used to capture a certain mindset prevalent among the perspectives of the Western intelligentsia that, by virtue of preponderance and easy access, forms the backbone of this piece.

What follows, then, is best considered a meditation emerging from the empirical closure within coronavirus life in both spirit and content, one built from those perspectives closest to me: sound studies and Continental philosophy (particularly phenomenology), supplemented by the mostly American journalism and blog writing that tracked a certain perspective on the virus and its social consequences as they unfolded in the moment. Consider these the quarantine sweatpants of my mind. And to launch this narrow thread from the depths of my own personal Platonic cave, we must, I think, begin with unpacking the shadow cast by a certain cultural mentality of disaster within Western modernity. If we are to treat COVID-19 as the noisy, disruptive horseman of our times, then we must conceive of the noise it produces in terms of an apparition rather than a tornado. Doing so involves tracing its sonic mark through the phantasmic residue of real-time myth that characterized the early months of the coronavirus, a profound sense of everyday alterity that whisked through the lived experience of that time in the form of a breathy whisper.

<div align="center">II.</div>

"You don't make the timeline, the virus makes the timeline." Dr. Anthony Fauci, infectious disease expert and voice of reason in the disastrous Trump administration's response to COVID-19, made the preceding statement in a March 25, 2020, television appearance, cautioning against lifting state-imposed lockdowns too quickly (LeBlanc 2020). In addition to being an accurate prediction of avoidable future consequences, the statement also served as one of the best articulations of the pervasive agency that the novel coronavirus held among societies at large. Nothing public or private seemed immune from its reach, a condition that necessitated development of a novel language to articulate this shared relationship between human and contagion. Slavoj Žižek (2020, chap. 5) suggested thinking about this process in terms of the Kübler-Ross stages of grief, a framing he argued could be used to connect medieval and modern mentalities toward plague-induced social entropy. But codifying this language, at least in the United States, ran against the broader cultural expectation of what the experience of a pandemic *resembles*—a virtual mindset at odds with an actual presence. Thinking of a virus in the intimate and animated terms of agency, as implied by Fauci's statement, was most certainly not part of that mindset prior to the pandemic. Rather, it manifested as something altogether more abstract and distant from the realm of possible occurrence, something imagined within a thoroughly visual frame. Therefore, it seems prudent as a

first step in arguing for the efficacy of a pandemic aurality to outline the components of a *pandemic visualism*, to show how such visualism still carries a pernicious hold on the imagination of what a pandemic *should be*, and to examine how this perspective is fraught with problems that aurality can perhaps ameliorate to some degree.

The first tenet of a pandemic visualism holds that the imagination of widespread disaster, at least for those in the West who have been excluded from its everyday weight, rests upon a perceived dominance of visual markers. Modern media, especially, has instantiated this imagination with the veneer of the spectacular. Our consumer landscape is replete with examples of alien invasions, earthquakes, hurricanes, and masses of animated corpses tearing our social, economic, and cultural fabric to shreds with grandiose violence. The subsequent and unsurprising mapping of such violence onto actual cataclysms, in the form of impactful moments, only perpetuates the desire for more cathartic representations in the sphere of media. There is perhaps no more instructive example of how this aesthetic economy of disaster uses visualism as its primary springboard than the aftermath of 9/11. The potent imagery of the World Trade Center aflame was nothing less than the ethos of the media representation of disaster incarnate. Further, that ethos was one in which the in-itself of its moment could not be denied, even by the most hardened of skeptics and conspiracy theorists. Doubt the cause or the circumstances, but there was no means by which one could gaslight the public into thinking the buildings back into existence. The consequence was that any subsequent image of power, whether in solidarity like the presumptuous "Mission Accomplished" banner on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* or in dissonance like the harrowing torture photographs emerging from Guantánamo Bay, necessarily stood in the shadow of that first image of smoking towers.[5]

Pandemics are no exception to this economy of disaster, even though they may seem less beholden to such spectacle or to the absolute power of a particular visual moment. Films like *The Omega Man* (1971) and *Contagion* (2011) feature spectacles of death where victims show contorted, pained expressions, as if they could feel the infection move precipitously through their bodies. This orientation is presaged throughout media capturing the terrible beauty of plagues in the historical record. In Europe, Medieval and Renaissance visual art captured the horror of the Black Death through tortured faces, scarred bodies, and no small number of demons and skeletons meting out divine justice.[6] Later, photography captured masses of statuesque wraiths donning cotton masks during the 1918 influenza pandemic, absent the overt religious allegory but communicating a horror just as potent through scenes of dutiful exhaustion. And in the absence of direct visual representation, chroniclers made chilling use of literary allusions, painting pictures with a poetic adoption of the usually rational figure of the number to supplement more abstract descriptions across the sensory spectrum.[7] Examples like these are nearly limitless, easily accessible, and do much to enliven the experience of these catastrophes after the fact. Where they fail, though, is in how they inculcate the modern assumption that we will know how serious a pandemic is by its sudden and dramatic manifestations upon the bodies that its perpetuator infects. This is not to argue against the existence or efficacy of striking COVID-19-related imagery, an efficacy that can be attested to by a bevy of health-care workers, first responders, and morticians.[8] No doubt these images of the virus's power will be filtered out by future historians and used to construct the COVID-19 pandemic as its own conglomeration of potent moments. At the same time, this recourse to the striking image does little to capture the quiet, incremental present of coronavirus life as an actually lived phenomenon, beholden not to the frozen context of immediacy but to the mechanisms of what the New Left intellectual Raymond Williams (1977) famously called *structures of feeling*. And it is precisely the disjunction between these two modes of imagined context and lived reality that fueled a rampant denialism in certain communities and political parties as to the severity or even existence of the pandemic.

This leads into a second and more troubling aspect of pandemic visualism, which revolves around the belief that the potency of the aforementioned images will in turn allow the construction of a representational apparatus that can capture the true inner workings of their perpetrator. We owe this aspect in part to the success of the sciences in unraveling some of the mystery surrounding the origins of plagues past. Only with the birth of modern microbiology did we discover that fleas (and not the wrath of God) transmitted the bubonic plague,

and that cholera moved via water-borne bacteria instead of miasmatic corruption. This knowledge, in turn, has transformed the impetus of pandemic visualism from a mere supplement of an unknown phenomenon into an important component for imagining the phenomenological presence of a particular contagion. What that contagion *is* and the biological and social effects that it causes become part and parcel of one and the same object.

The fact that COVID-19 is a virus makes this conceptual marriage all the more potent and self-assured. Notions of virality have long been colloquialized, filtered through a latent sociability inherent in the word "viral" (going viral, computer virus, etc.). In a strange twist, this sensibility of the viral may only serve to place our imagination further apart from the nature of the viral as such. In his 2012 book *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, media theorist Tony Sampson traces this idea through one particular sense of the viral: the political ubiquity of contagion metaphors that went hand in hand with the emergence of globalization discourses in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Fear of contagion, he notes, animated both critiques from the left against the specter of neoliberal globalization (Sampson's example is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's [2001] *Empire*) and those from the right accusing the same neoliberal forces of whittling away at the sanctity of the nation-state. These constitute two examples of a larger intellectual trend where viral metaphors have influenced thinking in the humanities and social sciences. One need only point out the proliferation of Latourian actor-network theory and Deleuzian assemblage theory to make this case, as both discourses are relation-centric and thereby open to being easily mapped onto contagion metaphors. Sampson centers the problem inherent in these discourses as one of representation and language, which put the onus on virality as an object instead of centering the concept of the viral upon the "forces of relational encounter in the social field" (Sampson 2012, 4). I would add that those same discourses present an epistemological problem as well—a false mentality that emerges from extrapolating a means of transmission and giving that means the symbolic weight inherent in the term "viral." Such a move assumes that we can use that designation to understand something about the experience of viruses themselves, and that our perception of what viruses *do* gives us an understanding of what they *are*. The consequence is that when these instantiations are then mapped back onto the being of actual viruses, the metaphor of virality and the actuality of the virus become indistinguishable, and this kind of thinking only occludes a rational appraisal of the actual virus. To give an example, the concept of *going viral* implies an ascertainable first cause, a person behind the meme, even if that cause takes some time and effort by scores of Twitter detectives to locate. Look for such an origin in the case of actual viruses, though, and you are always confronted with some aspect rendered permanently opaque. We will never know the identity or circumstance of the simian that first transmitted the AIDS virus to humans, any more than we will know the identity of the bat that first transmitted COVID-19. Their origins may as well be noumenal for all the access that our thoughts have toward their actual substance.

Where both these aspects of pandemic visualism culminate within the peculiar experience of COVID-19 is in the strange assurance derived from the most ubiquitous of virus-related pictures: the microscopic imagery that shows us the structure of the virus itself. The image displaying a frozen group of colorful alien balls adorned with suction cups is one that, like any good mug shot, appears to give a face and a sense of purpose to the name. To be sure, there is a certain genius in portraying the virus in this manner. Unlike the rampant uncertainty that defines, say, cryptid signification, these photos present the alien ontology of COVID-19 in manageable terms. They subtly imply that avoiding the worst consequences of the virus requires mere recognition and avoidance of a small gang of spheres floating out on the street or passing by your window. Yet in two important respects this mode of signification is as much an abstraction as any miasma or divine wrath. The first is that the color and mottled materiality marking these images are digital enhancements truer to what an electron microscope sees than any appearance our own eyes could muster, if possible. From there, you could easily make an argument reminiscent of ethnographer-philosopher Annemarie Mol's (2003) in *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, where the designation of an individual disorder as a singularity masks an inherent multiplicity derived from the myriad of perspectives in detection that go into any clinical identification.

The second abstraction is that the implied acuity of such an image only serves to perpetuate an unhelpful anthropomorphization of the virus, to provide an undercurrent of *why* to be mapped upon the image of *who*. Such a move is useful in trying to cast the virus as an ideological interloper as per the 9/11 playbook for representing the impact of a disaster. Yet early attempts by the American right to orientalize the nature of the virus and cast the act of flouting quarantines and mask mandates in terms of a duty not to succumb to an enemy of the people held little resonance among journalists outside the echo chamber of conservative media.[9] Easy blame was not forthcoming because the coronavirus carries no ideological essence unto itself. It leaves no pamphlets in the street, writes no cryptic comments on Reddit. It does not even have a mustache to twirl in the shadows. Just as our bodies are wholly susceptible to its infecting presence, coronavirus is in turn wholly immune to these feeble anthropomorphizing strategies. The only purpose a cellular-level photograph of "a" COVID-19 serves is to mask the pernicious ability of the virus to be both everywhere and nowhere, all the time and never, willing to be represented and flouting representation all the same.

Clearly, visualist paradigms of disaster in media and public discourse leave something to be desired with regard to COVID-19. So why, the question becomes, would aurality do anything more than shape the folds of this peculiar experience, especially since we can no more *hear* the in-itself of COVID-19 than we can *see* it? The answer lies in the epistemic sui generis that aurality perpetuates across the enactment of sensory forms. Consider this the apparatus forged from the flame of communications theorist Jonathan Sterne's *audiovisual litany* (Sterne 2003). Caveats abound, but visualism still draws upon an implicit assumption that the eye, all things being equal and unobstructed, will impart a sense of knowledge as such. The ideal is that to see is not only to believe, but also to know. Aurality, on the other hand, has never been gifted such authority in the Western imagination, and in turn can dispense with the myth of unmediated access to the in-itself from the very start. Within aurality, the vaporous ephemerality of COVID-19 reaches our experience, as Walter Benjamin famously contended with regard to memory, "like an echo awakened by a call," leaving a more honest ontological ground upon which to articulate our experiences (Benjamin 1986, 59). And there were signs of this sensibility throughout the height of the pandemic. Much of the visual language bantered around to capture the essence of life under the virus (shadow, specter, phantom, ghost) superimposed the logic of aurality upon the field of visual acuity, turning the eye into an ear.[10] Symptomless transmission moved about with the disembodied ease of the whispered rumor or innuendo. In the United States under Trump, there was no central apparatus of authority through which to clearly listen, only the muddy discourse between various levels of government and the free-for-all on social media. Thus spoke the novel coronavirus.

What aurality best accomplishes in relation to the virus, I contend, is to suggest a *monadological* frame in place of the anthropocentric one that we have found so lacking. It has been about ten years since the revitalization of interest in the writings of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who countered the ideas about top-down social hierarchies developed by his contemporary Émile Durkheim with a radical conceptualization of infinitesimal monads as the driving forces of social organization.[11] A virus may not be as purely infinitesimal as Tarde imagined his monads to be, but in practice it seems to be having much the same effect. One of the strengths of his "elementary structures of process" for anthropological thinking, argues anthropologist-musicologist Georgina Born, lies in how they "are generatively attuned to circulation and contagion, differentiation and resistance, as well as to the historical nature and location of such temporal relations…alerting us to the cumulation of these processes, and thereby also to the potential production of stasis and borders" (Born 2015, 237). In other words, he allows for a process philosophy that resists reduction to uninterrupted flow and becoming between things. Such an idea has necessary implications for aurality as it was deployed in the context of early discourses on coronavirus. As we now know, saying that COVID-19 ushered in a new era of silence and quiet was far too reductive and, in a sense, *monophonic*. A better way to conceive of those altered soundscapes is to say that the virus jumbled the spectrum of possibility within aural expectation, creating a polyphonic environment unmoored from absolute human agency. This was a world in which the Scottish goats of yesterday overlapped with the

glitching Zoom conferences of today and the hissing tear gas of tomorrow, a mass of starts and stops brought together only in their sense of difference. No wonder the spatiotemporal centering of visual acuity seemed so useless in that moment: the virus made the timeline, and seemingly everything else outside of the self, too.

Yet aurality, you could argue, was not only a mechanism for framing experience of an upended world external to the self. As maintaining a sense of autonomy within virus-induced changes to social spheres became so difficult to get a handle on, those in the privilege of relative isolation also sought to find some modicum of control within. Aurality can inform this move as well. For one of the ways to balance the experience of a world gone asunder was to find some relative comfort in hearing-oneself-speak.

<div align="center">III.</div>

COVID-19 was only beginning to whisper into the consciousness of the West when a Twitter user with the handle @KylePlantEmoji inadvertently provided a small crack into this isolated aural future. An innocuous tweet from January 27, 2020, started with a declaration: "fun fact: some people have an internal narrative and some don't." He continued by clarifying that while some people hear their thoughts as vocalized sentences, others think in the abstract terms of nonverbal images, and that (and this is the real kicker) "most people aren't aware of the other type of person." What briefly followed was a modest if heady internet freak-out, in which scores of responses threatened a repeat of the yanny/laurel divide from two years prior (Jack 2020; Lupsha 2020). Extenuating circumstances extinguished such a possibility, as by mid-February attention turned to the rapid spread of the coronavirus throughout the world. Yet the tweet remained remarkable for its uncanny timing, when an everyday life filled with quarantines brought forth a new preponderance of online ruminations on the presence and meaning of the inner voice.[12] And such newfound attention cemented the inner voice as an important *idée fixe* of early aural life under COVID-19, one that arguably lasted longer than the profound alteration of external soundscapes that garnered so much attention in the media and sat in stark juxtaposition to the awe inspired by the silenced city. Becoming attentive to one's own inner voice instead turned into an exercise in disruptive intimacy, sought in part because, as French philosopher Catherine Malabou put it, "quarantine is only tolerable if you quarantine from it" (Malabou 2020, S15).

This brief surge of attention directed toward the inner voice represented another odd anomaly emerging from the transformative social power of the coronavirus. Prior, you could argue that the inner voice had been left for dead in Western thought, and COVID-19 interrupted a precipitous fall from the mountaintop of being to a niche topic for certain corners of the humanities and social sciences. Though such a portrayal of the inner voice through the Western philosophical tradition is limited and selective, it nonetheless gives tangible shape to the descent. Start with Plato, for whom a dialogic construction of the inner voice was the cornerstone of selfhood, a pinnacle that Adriana Caveraro (2006, 33–41) suggested might not even regard the voice with as much authority as it might seem. Weave through Augustine's inner man shaped by God and Rousseau's concept of nature speaking through interiority, which add the metaphysical externalities of deity and world into the mix. By the time you account for examples like Hegel's criticism that writing cannot adequately capture inner thought, and Bahktin's collapsing together of inner and outer speech, the result appears to be an inner voice that had become a mere appendage, a nagging counterweight to everyday mental life.[13] There are exceptions, of course, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer's ([1975] 2013) equivocation of the inner voice with the divine crux of the Trinity in *Truth and Method*, but one can argue that these stand as valiant but futile exceptions to this trend. The sciences have proven more forgiving, but even Charles Fernyhough (2016), the most prominent active researcher on the neuroscience of inner voice, hints that collapsing the interior mentality into a limited concept of voice belies the multitude of linguistic and non-linguistic registers that such thought entails.

Answering with any rigor why the inner voice lost its lofty perch within the core of subjectivity is well beyond the scope of this essay.[14] Yet one possibility emerges as particularly relevant for my purposes here: the temptation to cast the inner voice as a victim of the image-dominated, capitalist-driven mass culture that squeezed any moments of quiet reflection into ever-smaller boxes. Or, in more overtly philosophical terms, a quaint artifact of a post-Cartesian self-coherence that is utterly passé within an intellectual environment dominated by the fractural subjectivity of the postmodern self.[15] One of the charms of this particular invocation is the presence of a culprit upon whom to lay blame: Jacques Derrida, or at least the incarnation of his thought that emerged in 1967, when he published some of his most lasting and controversial work. Texts like *Voice and Phenomenon* (2011)*, Of Grammatology* (1997), and *Writing and Difference* (1978b) established the Algerian-born thinker less as a run-of-the-mill philosopher and more as an intellectual version of Batman, stalking the dark alleys of Western thought, on the hunt for the systemically corrupting influence of logocentrism on every street corner, and acting beyond the cusp of the law.[16] Regardless of where his energies were directed, Derrida's collapsing of the logocentric voice as an epistemological tool was such that, as music theorist Brian Kane has aptly noted, subsequent philosophies of voice had to spin in completely different directions. Either the voice's importance lies in its materiality, à la Roland Barthes, or it would be seen as an empty signifier with no real value at all, à la Lacanian psychoanalysis (Kane 2015, 671–672). I will add a third move to that list, one that reckons the external voice in the performative and ethical sphere of sociocultural hermeneutics and by extension punts the question of any internal essence into the methodologies of developmental psychology and neuroscience.[17] Here, the inner voice assumes a dry functionality useful in charting childhood learning and mapping correspondences between thought and brain activity, while at the same time losing the poetic spark it once held as the cornerstone of dialogic selfhood. While I appreciate the functional cognitive perspective that neuroscience provides, placing the inner voice solely within its boundaries seems like regarding a tree for the ability of its leaves to enact the osmotic process with utmost efficiency. In essence, championing the cognitive perspective risks overlooking an equally important aesthetic dimension, a potential loss that is both lamentable and wholly unnecessary.

I wonder if this aesthetic side of the inner voice is what underwent that odd cultural reemergence within the envelope of the novel coronavirus, and if, by extension, this resurgence has exposed an interesting set of modern assumptions about inner voices that have proven hard to kick. Like, for example, the widespread reference to the inner voice as inner "mono"-logue, a colloquialism that implicates a psychic orientation necessary to keep a sense of coherent ego intact and prevent the subject from flying apart at the seams. This moniker implies a peculiarly modern idea that the voice within cannot maintain the dialogic structuring that it has skirted throughout Western thought since Plato, as if doing so would only amplify the forces from without that pull at subjective integrity on a daily basis. Hence, the modern social stigma that talking to yourself is evidence of madness, an assumption that would not have surprised Michel Foucault in the least. What all of this means, I would suggest, is that the prevailing argument that neuroscience has shoved the universality of inner monologue into the conceptual dustbin misses the point. Rather, a broader, colloquial realization that the inner voice is not universal both opens a space to consider the diversity and multiplicity of the inner voices that *do* exist, and gives the absence of such voices the same aesthetic weight as their presence.

The funny thing is that we have been here before—a place where an aesthetic potentiality within the inner voice could emerge out of a rational, quasi-universalist perspective. And it emerges from within the conceptual shadow of the aforementioned Derrida, specifically his famous critique of Edmund Husserl in *Voice and Phenomenon* (Derrida 2011) regarding the relationship between the inner voice and phenomenological method. There is no small irony in considering this book, which some believe demolished the efficacy of the inner voice, as a means to argue for its resurgence during the pandemic. However, the orthodox casting of this critique as either a straight-up refutation of Husserl or a misunderstanding of Husserl's intent conflates Derrida the myth with Derrida the thinker. There is ample reason to believe that Derrida was not only a subtle, effective interpreter of phenomenology but also one who enhanced the importance of the inner voice within its framework.[18]

Polemical or not, he recognized a productive rift in the way Husserl conceived of interiority, a rift that offers a fascinating way to consider the unexpected colloquial interest in the inner voice during the early months of the novel coronavirus.

Let us start by encapsulating Husserl's interest in the inner voice for his phenomenological project writ large, a small spoonful of a very thick stew. In seeking to provide an underlying metaphysics for modern science, Husserl conceived of a phenomenological reduction through which our consideration of objects would proceed by bracketing ideas about them from the "natural attitude" of the world, a process that would become the benchmark of an *eidetic science* ("a science of essential Being"; Husserl 2013, 46). That act of reduction, which he eventually called the *epoché* (an expression he borrowed from the skeptical tradition of Western philosophy), needed an agent of thought within the self through which such reduction could commence. This apparatus of self could engage with all of the ideal qualities that objects, whether physical or imaginary, hold beyond the mere presences and appearances driven by sensory perception. In *Logical Investigations* (2001), his first foray into outlining the phenomenological method, Husserl suggests a possible site of the necessary interiority: the inner voice. Only in one's "solitary mental life," as Husserl called it, can the word manifest as pure expression, whereas in verbal communication any expression becomes an act of *indication* (a sign that only points toward other signs). The language of the inner voice could not indicate other things, he argued, because there would be no purpose in creating some outside, temporally bound reference for a phenomenon wholly within the mind. "In [inner] monologue," he concludes, "words can perform no function of indicating the existence of mental acts, since such indication would there be quite purposeless. For the acts in question are themselves experienced by us at that very moment" (Husserl 2001, 191).

Husserl devoted less than two pages in the lengthy *Logical Investigations* (2001) to the inner voice.[19] For Derrida, though, this small reference was enough to make Husserl another housefly trapping himself within the spider's web of *logos*. He contends that Husserl's entire conception of the inner voice implies a natural proximity between voice and thought that assumes a metaphysical atemporality in the act of speaking to oneself. Derrida famously rejects this formulation, holding that the inner voice is instead quite grounded in temporality, subject to the gaps and differences inherent in linguistic signs, and beholden to language as a formative aspect from the very start. So he concludes that the inner voice cannot be shored up as a place of transcendental coherence for the purpose of phenomenological inquiry in the way Husserl suggests. Any attempt to do so merely breathes life into the metaphysics of presence that the young Derrida thought to be the shaky scaffolding of Western philosophy.

This is a rather perfunctory encapsulation of Derrida's complicated critique, and stopping here one can see how the inner voice might lie ontologically ruined in its aftermath.[20] However, there is another, more productive reading relevant to the aesthetics of the inner voice mentioned earlier. This reading emerges from an oft-overlooked moment where Derrida folds Husserl's own phenomenological methodology back upon itself. In the midst of arguing that Husserlian interiority tries to anchor the inner voice beyond the influence of external signification, Derrida drops a potent little contention: "The reduction to the monologue is really a *putting of empirical worldly existence between brackets* [emphasis added]" (Derrida 2011, 43). What Derrida appears to suggest here is that were an isolation of the inner voice even possible, it would have to be constructed through the very form of reduction—the epoché—for which Husserl needs the inner voice as a prerequisite. Using the inner voice as the source of the phenomenological reduction would thus be contradictory. Many commentators on Husserl have leapt to his defense here, pointing out that the act of epoché involves a reduction of *beliefs* about objects, rather than the objects themselves, or that Husserl never explicitly linked the inner voice to epoché at all.[21] For Derrida, such arguments mistake the forest for the trees. For what he actually intends with this passage, I surmise, is to make light of a terminological ambivalence, one of his quietest and most aesthetic signature moves.[22] For him, epoché cannot simply be cleansed of its history within the Pyrrhonist skepticism preserved in the writings of the Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus (2000), where the suspension of judgment was all

about creating an anxiety-free balance *within the self* (an *ataraxia*). Derrida considered it fair game to hold Husserl to this historical standard, regardless of any desire to abstract a higher register of selfhood for the purpose of phenomenological inquiry. The implication is that because epoché already carries a tangible history within language and philosophical discourse, any move to place limitations on its meaning (as Husserl does) must be considered an aesthetic act from the very start.

My position is that while many seem to think that Derrida merely blows up any ontological possibility for the inner voice, what actually emerges is a peculiar dynamic in which Derrida's critique actually builds upon Husserl's foundation, if only as a series of subterranean passages hidden behind trapdoors and false staircases. Husserl, briefly as he did, made the inner voice important again to the construction and enactment of selfhood from *within the self*. In this, he pushed back against the long history from Augustine through Rousseau of external impositions. The result is an ideal in which the inner voice could plausibly serve as a point from which the self could ascertain and engage with the external world as such. As far as Derrida is concerned, you could argue that his positions vis-à-vis Husserl and the epoché might be disingenuous in terms of philosophical method. But there is no doubt that his attention more than likely saved Husserl's own concept of the inner voice from the fog of obscurity. Moreover, Derrida opens the door for thinking about the phenomenological epoché as a productive failure. This manifests in one sense, as articulated by philosopher Bettina Bergo, in how phenomenology tends to be "filled out" by the very psychology its originator was so keen to omit (Bergo 2005, 131–132). Yet this failure is also fundamentally aesthetic, in that one cannot wholly bracket the self from the flood of worldly signs but instead must create avenues for engagement with the chaos of the world. Together, then, what the Husserl-Derrida fusion produces is an inner voice manifesting within a continuum between the transcendent and the immanent, where the act of positioning such a voice within fields of signs and objects becomes aesthetically driven rather than ontologically given.

Still, if Husserl gave the inner voice modern viability, and Derrida took that viability and opened the door for its aesthetic potential, the fact remains that any linguistic turn regarding the inner voice brings forth the old Platonic phantom of the dialogic. Addressing this necessitates the intervention of a third perspective. At the risk of reanimating Plato in yet another arena, I want to engage with a fascinating interpretation of his dialogic voice from a 2019 essay by philosopher Alexandru-Ovidiu Gacea, which will prove helpful in this regard. Gacea argues that Plato was actually rather ambivalent about the idea that the inner voice has some privileged access to the soul. In fact, the act of inner dialogue does not quite meet the threshold for logos, since it never arrives at a definite affirmation or denial of that which is "discussed" in the mind. Instead, it enacts "the 'weaving' together of question and answer, 'aimlessly' wandering about, finding the right path, losing it, and start[ing to look] for it anew" (Gacea 2019, 41). To anyone familiar with the Platonic dialogues, this sensibility will seem familiar, as it encapsulates the tenor of Socratic interlocution quite well. How, then, did the Platonic inner voice become the mark of the interior, immaterial self in subsequent philosophical discourse? Gacea further argues that this assumption rests upon a problematic teleology of subjective-objective selfhood that stretches from early Christian discourses on individuality all the way through modern psychological assumptions about the self. The more accurate Platonic sensibility regarding the inner voice, he concludes, is not subjective, or even purely dialogic, but *koinonic*. Stemming from the Greek word *koinonia*, this mode, as Gacea notes, "conveys a form of togetherness or 'communion' that doesn't invalidate individuality (as a source of disharmony and conflict) but brings it into a responsive relationship" (2019, 51). In other words, the koinonic mode transcends the dualistic foundation of the dialogic mode, depending instead on multiplicities emerging from the interiority of the mind. A koinonic inner voice, therefore, cannot be the barest, most reductive point of subjectivity since it serves as the first instance of a social discourse, even if that discourse is wholly within the mind of an individual.

I want to spin three important elements of Gacea's reading of Plato into the discussion of the inner voice emerging from the Husserl/Derrida debate examined above. First, I would suggest that the collectivity of the koinonic is one of the most productive aesthetic possibilities that Derrida's signifier-penetrated inner

voice opens up. Just as choruses of physical voices are conglomerations of unrepeatable singularities, so too should the inner voice be thought of in terms of a pluralism that incorporates absence as readily as our political imagination hones in upon silence. Second, any openness to the koinonic must always necessitate the potential of openness to the voice of the other, whether real or imagined. A hearing-oneself-speak is always necessarily connected to a hearing-of-another, even if that connection is not always temporally or spatially apparent. Third, this koinonic polyphony is no more an immediate or endless source of self-presence than a monophonic inner voice. Gacea speaks about wanderings and pathways through which the inner voice moves, precisely the sort of blind alleys and false passages that mark an honest account of any subjective ascertainment of the world of signs. If the inner voice is fundamental in any way here, it is as a means to simulate relational value, piling porous epoché upon porous epoché, and preparing the self to weave through a side of the world completely opaque to it. In this formulation, the inner voice becomes a means to harness the echoed traces of those parts of the world beyond the purview of direct experience and ground them as thinkable to prepare the self to listen to others on the outside.

What I am suggesting, to sum up, is that the everyday isolation imposed by COVID-19 has given popular consciousness to a radical shift in conceptualizing the inner voice that has been happening in philosophical circles for quite some time. This shift goes beyond the realization that the inner voice is not a universal phenomenon of consciousness, or that recognition of and dependence upon that inner voice can be either constructive or destructive, depending on the mentality of the individual. It is almost as if getting in touch with hearing-oneself-speak seems to have sparked a mass realization of just how much lived experience has been drowned out by the noises and imposed rhythms of modern life. And with that reopening of time and space come questions over whether hearing-oneself-speak is a worthwhile, or even sane, activity to engage in. Some people are now open to hearing beyond boundaries that they have not been able, or have been unwilling, to hear through before. Others seem determined to recreate the envelope of late capitalist social noise by any means possible, even to the detriment of their health and that of others. Either way, it is no mistake that the most fervent and pervasive political messaging in the age of coronavirus revolved around the verb *to listen*. Such listening offered the potential for an ethical, communitarian intensity during a time when the physical conglomeration of bodies in space was itself ethically suspect.

Yet at its root, choosing whether to listen or not, and how to enact and frame that listening, is always already aesthetic before it becomes ethical. Therefore, the question becomes whether or not an awakened inner voice is woke enough for the historical moment into which it unexpectedly found itself. "If a voice speaks to me," Jean-Paul Sartre once noted, "it is I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel" ([1946] 2007, 26). This is true of the inner voice as well. For if one realizes that such a voice carries a devilish tone, none of the angelic cries from outside the self will matter worth a damn.

<p style="text-align:center">IV.</p>

What were these cries that so thoroughly broached the interiority of the coronavirus-isolated self, whose timbre had been judged angelic in that precipitous moment? The most potent were those that remind me of a well-traveled snippet regarding Martin Luther King Jr. and his visit to Watts in the aftermath of the 1965 uprising. King was questioning a group of young men about their celebratory mood among the wrecked buildings and lost lives. How could you say you have won in the midst of such calamity? he wondered. "We won because we made them pay attention to us," one of the men responded, emphasizing a sense of accomplishment pouring forth out of the veneer of ruin.

I found this story buried in a fantastic article by Lex Pryor, written in the wake of a similar uprising against police violence in Minneapolis, on the controversy surrounding the ending of Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right*

Thing. Pryor contended that real-life uprisings like the ones in Watts and Minneapolis, as well as the fictional one Lee portrays in Bed-Stuy, try to grab the attention of the "wandering gaze" of the state, which has long overlooked generations of Black grievance (Pryor 2020). Under the aegis of the coronavirus, they also caught the attention of the White ear like never before. For a time after the mass protests started, there was a deluge of unexpected White sympathy on social media: calls for solidarity with Black protesters on Twitter, black squares on Instagram, and Facebook posts vowing to stay silent unless boosting the voices of people of color. Each of these acts became a performance through which White listeners told the world, "We're listening now." Even the sparse burning associated with the protests seemed to resonate with a different tenor. Consider that in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, part of the visual spectacle of disaster focused on the gutted Korean-owned businesses that had fallen victim to the flames. There were memorable images like that of Chang Lee, screaming and brandishing a firearm on the roof of his parents' strip mall while his own gas station burned blocks away. He later excoriated local authorities, saying that "they left us to burn" (Lah 2017). In Minneapolis, by contrast, when an Indian restaurant in the vicinity of the most intense violence of that uprising caught fire and burned to the ground, the proprietor was cognizant of a longer game at play. "Let it burn," he said (Islam 2020). The implication was clear: a restaurant could be rebuilt from the ashes; those whose lives had been extinguished due to police violence could not come back.

In some ways, this signifies a remarkable transition in the collective imagination surrounding recent protests against racial inequality. Although the folds of disaster visualism discussed earlier certainly make a cameo in the rare and minute flare-ups of violence that accompany any protest movement, demonstrations during the summer of coronavirus were by and large known for their comparatively quiet benevolence. Pluralities of people took to the streets and camped in front of state capitols for the entire summer, newsworthy events unto themselves that were allowed to persist with relative silence beneath the shadow of COVID-19's deathly omnipresence. Such an environment, devoid of the stereotypical spectacle that feeds the appetite of those who view the world in polarized terms, is one in which aurality as an avenue of knowledge can thrive. So the novel coronavirus, you could argue, created the means through which a multifaceted *they* paid attention not only with their gaze, but started to listen as well. While it is right to be wary of focusing on White listening to grievance as opposed to the actual grievances of Black communities, it can be argued that White listening being noteworthy at all presented an aspect that separated protests after the death of George Floyd from earlier occasions when Black Lives Matter took to the streets.

What emerged from this perceived moment of sympathetic listening, at least from a philosophical perspective, was an intriguing if strange ethics grounded in an experience of alterity that seems implausible to imagine absent the intervention of COVID-19. One cannot help but bring Emmanuel Levinas to mind here, but such listening almost manifests as an odd, photonegative version of Levinas's ethical ideal.[23] Still, this sympathetic listening holds undeniable potency, and its recourse to *immersion* is key for understanding why. To qualify this statement, I propose that immersion actualizes the sympathetic listening referenced above through four distinct attributes. First, immersion is that state within aurality that seems to present a new frontier for engagement in a world evacuated of the comforting significance of sociability and laden with the time and space to listen. Second, immersion embeds the social within a rubric of allures and intensities that are hallmarks of the philosophy of sound. Third, immersion invites a dispensing of perspective and instead emphasizes intimacy, flow, and sympathy as the cornerstone of experience. And fourth, immersion implies that if you just listen with enough intent or desire, you create the means to bridge the phenomenological chasm between discreet selves.

These attributes certainly imbue immersion with a powerful existential position within the practice of listening, but one that upon closer inspection is riddled with gaps. Sound artist Will Scrimshaw (2015), in particular, has questioned this dominant narrative surrounding immersion to great effect. In his essay "Exit Immersion," Scrimshaw notes how the literature in sound studies has employed this concept, with regard to listening, as a major tool in the fight for sensory justice against the perceived hegemony of ocularcentrism.

This move, he argues, presents an issue in how it privileges a tenuous metaphysics of the sonic over various historical, cultural, and anthropological perspectives that may present less than immersive opportunities for the listening subject. Immersion is therefore susceptible to some boilerplate problems associated with Sterne's aforementioned audiovisual litany from the start. Where Scrimshaw makes a more radical move, though, is in linking the ideology of immersion to what speculative realist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2008) has termed "correlationist" logic. In the context of immersion, the "correlation" in question revolves around how sound is invested with significance only insofar as it impacts the perceiver alone.[24] As such, the issue is not one of mere anthropocentrism, but of an aural world collapsed upon the relation between listener and object, where anything outside of that relation is deemed either unknowable or, in more ontologically extreme interpretations, practically nonexistent.[25] Scrimshaw's solution to the correlationist problem is intriguing if beyond the scope of this essay, but his confluence of immersion and correlation is where his argument holds the most critical import for any ethical listening grounded in an idealized sympathetic resonance.[26] Put simply, Scrimshaw outlines a philosophy of immersion in which, by implication, the perceived enclosure of immersion cannot draw its ethical value from that very state of enclosure. Such value must always seep in from outside the correlative relationship between listener and object. Or, to put this in less philosophical language, any correlation—even one considered as modest and thoughtful as an immersive ethical listening—can easily slip into the self-centered echo of hubris with little intention or effort.

There is a scene from the HBO television series *Succession* that articulates the slippery surface of this ethical immersion in an interesting way. Dopey confidants Tom Wambsgans and Cousin Greg discuss Tom's plan to introduce the slogan "We're listening" in a speech promoting ATN, the show's fictional right-wing news empire *à la* Fox News. Greg informs Tom that ATN's lawyers felt the slogan was too close to the actual eavesdropping the company is secretly conducting on its audience, leaving Tom desperate for a last-minute solution. After some back and forth, they decide on the more ambiguous "We hear for you," meant to imply an intimacy between corporation and consumer that still exhibits a creepy veneer of media omnipresence. This is not the first time that soft branding has papered over institutional collusion, to be sure. And the potential pitfalls for this shift are obvious. It certainly falls into every trap laid out by Robin James (2019) in *The Sonic Episteme*, where sympathetic resonance becomes a core neoliberal strategy for translating human behavior between qualitative singularities of experience and an exploitable series of quantitative frequency ratios (i.e., statistical designations like "20% of people are *x*") applicable across broad swaths of a population. Yet I am also struck by the ease with which "We're listening" becomes "We hear for you" at the level of the intersubjective, a phenomenon that owes less to corporate biopolitics than the psychological allure of performing an ethical disposition. As with the inner voice, this is another point where the aesthetic outflanks the ethical, where any sense of devoted listening ends up resting upon laurels often granted to the performance of showing an open ear. Nietzsche warns against this very sedentary descent by describing a strange encounter on a bridge between his avatar Zarathustra and a giant ear attached to a small body. "The people…told me that this great ear was not only a human being, but a great one, a genius," Nietzsche writes. "But I never believed the people when they spoke of great men…who had too little of everything and too much of one thing" (Nietzsche 2016, 63).

What makes the stark ambivalence of Nietzsche's passage so powerful is the way in which it allegorizes an intractable dilemma inherent in this ethical turn. Like the giant ear, the act of listening for justice under the coronavirus carries too much of one thing, and even as the pandemic promoted an atmosphere in which aurality could serve as the sensory backdrop for an ethical immersion, the pandemic also broadcast this quiet failure for those willing to hear it. That failure, that "one thing," is that any "just listening" in the age of coronavirus cannot truly be ethical because it is fettered by an ethical quandary from the very start. How can such listening be truly ethical when borne out of a tremendous human cost, especially among the very people who are supposed to benefit from that listening? What does it say about those who claim "We're listening" that the emergence of such an ethical listening required the backdrop of unmitigated global disaster? Do those listeners become, in the

privilege of isolation, big ears and nothing more? These questions, you might respond, seem directed at straw men and lack any sense of fairness toward the subtle folds of individual engagement. It is a fair point. Unfairness, though, is something at which the historical phantasmagoria of aurality excels and offers a hard lesson for the ethical champion in the aesthetics of failure.

When so inclined, one hears the unfairness everywhere. Unfairness suffuses the institutional failure to curtail the coronavirus in the communities most vulnerable to its power. Unfairness animates cultural theorist and poet Fred Moten's claim in the preface of his magisterial *Black and Blur* that the yoke of slavery constitutes a *durational field* as opposed to an *event*, and that art intended to capture such trauma in the comparatively momentary terms of event is doomed to failure (Moten 2017, xii). Unfairness makes audible a sinister allegory infusing the Schopenhauer passage with which I opened this essay. Ensconced in the city streets of Frankfurt, Schopenhauer had no reason to give the crack of a whip any real metaphorical weight. It was the epitome of sonic annoyance, disrupting the pontificating individual and nothing more. For someone like Moten, nothing could be further from the truth—the crack of the whip is always laden with historical meaning by its very summoning, whether Schopenhauer was aware of the connection or not. Unfairness summons Derrida, the trickster philosopher of the unfair, who would tag Schopenhauer with the historical weight of his wording as surely as he once did to Husserl. And unfairness suffuses the inability to come to some satisfactory conclusion even as the virus begins to abate. As I finished my first draft of this essay, Kenosha burned as Minneapolis had earlier that summer, but without eliciting quite the same sympathetic ear. Teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA) silently protested on already silent courts, as then–Los Angeles Clippers head coach Doc Rivers became the latest to tearfully lament the unfairness of his people's lot.[27] Even amid the "vaccine spring" of 2021, New Delhi became the New York of the previous year. And as I am putting the final touches on this piece, the Delta variant is forcing masks back on and eliciting a further burgeoning of spontaneous communitas, in which people loudly voice their disdain at local school board meetings. With isolation or without, every day the same phenomena seem to become new again in some strange purgatory between coincidence and eternal return. In light of this, it is reasonable to conclude that the desire to develop a form of ethical listening as a lesson to be learned from the diminished soundscape of quarantine can only mitigate that inadequacy and unfairness to a certain extent, if at all.

Inadequacy and unfairness, though, are good lessons to take from life under the novel coronavirus. Earlier, I questioned the wisdom of anthropomorphizing COVID-19 within an immanent frame, even though it seems to display a strange genius for laying bare many White heteronormative assumptions about the world. Making the opposite move—deifying the virus within a transcendental frame—carries its own concerns. Thinking that the coronavirus manipulates us—much as Zeus manipulated Agamemnon in *The Iliad* by giving him a dream—is in some ways no better than drawing a mustache and cowboy hat on the microscopic image of the virus.[28] And yet, resisting the urge to cast upon the virus a tenuous immanent or transcendent "thou" while it continues to carve deep wounds across the world is easier said than done. Perhaps when the pandemic has long passed, people will be able to enclose COVID-19 within a prison of thingness, making it a virus and nothing more. Until then, there is a strange benefit in listening to what the virus is telling us while it is here. And one of those many messages regards the veracity of aurality. I posited before that COVID-19 has taken all the encompassing blankets woven from the fabric of pandemic visualism and shown that they no longer keep the cold of the Real at bay. I am forced to conclude that similar blankets woven from the inner voice and its accompanying ethical listening may fare no better in the end. No doubt some will cling to their disintegrating fabric as they would a favorite shirt washed one too many times. My hope, though, is that others will realize that the message from across the trans-sensory Atlantic, *what COVID-19 hath wrought*, is that aurality alone is no panacea for the woes that plague us.

NOTES

1. The ever-productive Žižek published a book about the virus in the early months of 2020, before it made its deadly inroads into the United States. The book only speculated about what the virus's incursion would resemble. This necessitated a sequel, published in early 2021, that incorporated further reflections upon the arguments made in his first book.

2. This, of course, references the work of ethnomusicologist Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2016), whose take on aurality concerns the residual sonic imagination that haunts the politics and institutions that created the written contents housed in colonial archives in Colombia.

3. Think of this in similar terms to Karl Jaspers's controversial coinage of the term "Axial Age" to describe what he understood as the emergence in many cultures about the year 500 BCE of ideas about Being, the "depths of selfhood," the "lucidity of transcendence," and the role of personal reflection in conceptualizing these questions—concepts that he believed were pivotal to the development of modern Western thinking about religion, history, and politics (Jaspers 2013, 2). While the "age of coronavirus" does not have the same vast scope as the "Axial Age," it shares with it an elegant yet inexact way of thinking in tandem about a disparate series of historical attributes.

4. For those unfamiliar with the practice referenced by this metaphor, the spitball was a kind of baseball pitch in which a player would smear saliva, petroleum jelly, or an other substance on a ball to facilitate a greater degree of unpredictable movement on its journey to the plate. The technique was common during the sport's so-called Dead Ball era and its heyday ended after the 1920 season, when Major League Baseball banned it. Said ban was subject to lax enforcement, though, as evident in a brief renaissance for the illegal pitch during the 1960s (Baccellieri 2021).

5. Sound and listening were subsumed under and brought to bear within the power wrought by this visualist paradigm of 9/11 as well. Some well-known examples can be found in Ritter and Daughtry (2007) and Cusick (2006).

6. The University of Iowa Library (2017) hosts an online gallery that features harrowing representations of the Black Death by artists who experienced that disease firsthand.

7. Speaking about the first wave of the Black Death, which hit Florence in the late 1340s, Marchionne di Coppo Stefani described the overlapping stacks of dead bodies and soil in the city's massive community grave pits as intertwined "just as one makes lasagne with layers of pasta and cheese" (quoted in Ole Jørgen Benedictow 2006, 285). A July 1834 cholera outbreak in Madrid precipitated a spate of violence against Jesuits and Franciscans suspected of poisoning the city's wells, with nearly fifty murdered in public by mobs on a single night (Shah 2016; Cohn 2018). And historian Bathsheba Demuth (2020) uncovered a chilling quote about the 1918 influenza pandemic, which tore like wildfire through native Alaskan communities; describing the event, an unnamed person stated that occupants of a remote village were dying so fast that "they dug one hole and then buried ninety-nine people in one grave" (Demuth 2020).

8. Narratives from those working in the medical and health-care professions are almost too numerous to count at this point, but one particularly effective series in the early months of the pandemic was published in *Slate*. Here, Kelly Keene and Lauren Serino (2020), two emergency room physicians, detail their experiences during the worst incarnation of the outbreak in New York City.

9. Misinformation about the virus has had a wide impact, from spreading the virus through unmasked gatherings to a slate of harassments, assaults, and murders targeting Asians and Asian Americans.

10. In the context of social media, a more expansive analysis of this phenomenon can be found in Philipp Wicke and Marianna M. Bolognesi (2020).

11. I lack the space here to give a full account of Tarde's complicated theories of how the imitative capacity of monads creates a peculiar (by our standards) notion of the social. The ürtext for Tardean monadological thought undoubtedly is his book *Monadology and Sociology* (2012). A fine overview of Tarde's career and eclectic writings can be found in Matei Candea (2015). Further analyses and criticisms can be found in Bruno Latour (2002) and Graham Harman (2012).

12. Mental health practitioners, for example, began to extol the virtues of manifesting a positive mentality through its cultivation, while simultaneously warning of the dangers inherent in succumbing to negativity stemming from that same awareness (Integris 2020; American Psychological Association 2020). One writer went so far as to create a satirical inner monologue of the coronavirus itself, which sounded (for better or worse) a bit like Flavor Flav (Conochan 2020).

13. A fine encapsulation of this Augustinian perspective can be found in Gareth Matthews (1967, 166–172). For a discussion of the Rousseau example, see Jason Neidleman (2016, 94–96). For a discussion of an example from Hegel, which examines his disdainful comparison of Chinese and German, see Longxi Zhang (1992, 19–22). The ideas by Bahktin that I referenced can be found in Voloshinov (1986, 19).

14. A noble and very accessible attempt to get at this question written prior to the onset of the pandemic can be found in Jaekl (2018). Victoria Tkaczyk (2020) also charts the development of perspectives on the inner voice during the "long twentieth century" in psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, and linguistics. Focusing primarily on the work of linguist Ruth Hirsch Weir, Tkaczyk describes how the inner voice found its most productive home within the sciences, even as it faded from philosophical significance.

15. Although he does not specifically reference the inner voice, Fredric Jameson gives a sense of how this fractal interiority might emerge through recourse to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the "ideal schizophrenic," who conceives of their relationship with the work solely through the lens of difference (Jameson 1991, 344–346). Such reorientation from depth to surface, cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2005) notes in reference to Jameson, results from the collapsing of a fine distinction between interior self and exterior world, a distinction that had been one of the aesthetic hallmarks of modernism.

16. Indeed, many in the British analytical tradition regarded Derrida as an infamous polemicist who attacked those he thought misrepresented his positions and critiques. The best-known example stems from Derrida's criticisms of the ordinary language philosophy of J. L. Austin in a 1971 lecture published as the essay "Signature Event Context" (1977). This essay prompted an intense response from analytical philosopher and Austin acolyte John Searle (1977), followed by an equally intense response to Searle's response from Derrida (1978b). Alan Gross (1994) gives a helpful breakdown of the rancorous debate as a whole and its implications for the philosophy of language.

17. I am referring here to the spate of important work on gendered and racialized interpretations of the voice and the effects those interpretations have on issues of institutional power, public policy, and the entertainment industry. See especially James (2015), Stoever (2016), and Eidsheim (2018).

18. Matthew Rahaim makes just such a claim about *Voice and Phenomenon* in a forthcoming book chapter he graciously shared with me while I was editing this essay (since published as Rahaim [2021]). Rahaim uses Derrida's reading of Husserl as a platform to argue for a more nuanced understanding of ideas about the immediacy and authenticity of vocality in musical practice.

19. It is worth noting that Husserl, as far as I can tell, never gave the inner voice similar standing in his subsequent reboots of the phenomenological project. This is perhaps due to the complete rejection by his former protégé Martin Heidegger of the very metaphysical reduction that he (Husserl) thought necessary to any phenomenological inquiry, and the subsequent popularity of Heidegger's anti-metaphysical thinking on postwar Continental philosophy as a whole. An abstract concept like the inner voice, especially given its philosophical connections to Platonic idealism, could not hold water in a conceptual atmosphere grounded so thoroughly in the immanence of language. Making such a calculation may have influenced the shape of Husserl's unfinished final work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970), which for the first time integrates the weight of history and culture into the phenomenological project (whereas in earlier writings he was keen to abstract those elements from the process of phenomenological reduction). See David Carr's "Translator's Introduction" to *The Crisis* (in Husserl 1970, xv–xxi).

20. For those who would like a more detailed and helpfully lucid extrapolation of this argument, see Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanaugh (2014, 80–85).

21. See, for example, Evans (1991, 70) and Dillon (1995, 40–41). A concise and fair summation of criticism of Derrida's stance on Husserl can be found in Auerbach (2011).

22. Another wonderful example of this move by Derrida is his criticism of Heidegger's ideologically driven attempts to conceptually separate two words often cast as translations of the Latin word *spiritus*: the German word *geist* and the Hebrew word *ruah*. Derrida aptly noted how Heidegger went to great pains to ground geist as a wholly German historical and linguistic concept, which meant that he fell into a harsher and more bigoted version of the conceptual trap that Derrida saw ensnaring Husserl's epoché. See Derrida (1989).

23. If morality can become "first philosophy" through such listening, it does so by means that Levinas would likely have found problematic (Levinas 2012, 304). Instead of the interpersonal relation Levinas championed, through which dialogue reveals the path toward transcendence of the I/not-I divide, this new ethics of the COVID-19 era was born of stark isolation from interpersonal contact en masse. The face, which Levinas saw as mysterious in its "refusal to be contained" and its inability to be "comprehended" or "encompassed" (194) takes on a different, immanent mystery when covered by the mask. Here, the dialogic uncertainty of the encounter is replaced by the imagined certainty of koinonic immersion that manifests when the mediated cry of the oppressed cuts through to the core of the lonesome self.

24. Meillassoux more broadly defined correlationism as a way of thinking dominant in Western philosophy since David Hume and Immanuel Kant, which holds that nothing can be known outside of the relation between human

thought and the encountered world. In his book *After Finitude* (2008), Meillassoux diagnoses correlationism as the primary ill of modern philosophy, and instead presents an ontology based in the radical contingency of all phenomena and the unfettered existence of things outside the purview of human thought and understanding.

25. Graham Harman (2021) identifies what he sees as a troubling "politics of the void" in a recent response to an article by Catherine Malabou (2021) that criticizes the broadly defined speculative realist movement as not being sufficiently political or material in its ontological interests. While making this claim, Malabou, in a move reminiscent of post-Lacanian thinkers like Žižek, argues for a radical ontology in which subject and object mutually construct one another in an otherwise existential void stemming from the lack inherent in the Real, an idea which finds grounding in the unlikely figure of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Harman counters Malabou in part by stating that her ontological claims cannot themselves be sufficiently political, since by nature they cannot grapple with the existential threat of climate change, a problem that manifests quite apart from any construction of an individual subject. He articulates the crux of the issue in suitably pithy terms, too: "Lacan was a thinker of many gifts, but he is one of the last people I would phone for advice on global warming, and the same holds for Althusser" (Harman 2021, under "3 Politics of the Void").

26. Scrimshaw's solution to this difficult problem of correlation is to proffer a separate trajectory for the listening subject through the concept of *immanence*, which he feels carries a rational, epistemic virtue that the more corruptible aesthetic of immersion lacks. "In extricating immanence from immersion and stressing its contiguity with the rational," he concludes, "the conceptual is privileged over intuitive or aesthetic experience in a manner concomitant with the post-conceptual conditions of contemporary art…[a privileging that] does not entail the eradication of [the aesthetic by the conceptual] but a reorientation of thought and practice that surmounts the constraints imposed by a phenomenological predisposition that is most ardent in celebrations of the immersive" (Scrimshaw 2015, 167).

27. Journalist Michael Weinreb (2020) nicely outlines the spate of protests erupting in American professional sports leagues in the wake of the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in September of that year.

28. In book 2 of *The Iliad*, Zeus comes to Agamemnon in a dream and tells him to conduct an all-out assault on the Trojans, knowing that this attack will fail and force the prideful Greek king to seek out Achilles and bring him back into the fold. I have Earl Fontenelle's (2017) *Secret History of Western Esotericism Podcast* to thank for reminding me of this tidbit, which I had long forgotten.

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